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WILLIAM ALLEN KNIGHT

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BY

WILLIAM ALLEN KNIGHT

Author of

"The Song of Our Syrian Guest," etc.

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NORWOOD • MASS • U • S • A

NO ROOM IN THE INN

* * *

I. ALONG A BRIDLE-PATH

WHEN shall I forget that night by the cook's fire in camp at Nablus!

We had ridden all day in the glare of the Syrian sun, ridden on and on wherever the bridle-path found a way over plain and hill, until nightfall sent a quick chill through our weary bones. But at last we heard the voice of the stream that welcomes travelers where the path from Galilee emerges on the highway. So in good heart we rode for the lights of Nablus shining dimly through smoke in the valley, while Ebal and Gerizim loomed hugely in the dark on either hand. And then, supper being ended and the night wind mist-laden and the cook a friendly soul, we lounged in a tent snug with the warmth of a charcoal fire and sundry savory odors, while our cot-tents waited in a spectral group outside and dogs barked at the rising moon.

But better even than such creature-comfort after a long day's riding is the talk of that night in my memory.

There were four of us — Maloof and I, the muleteer listening by the door and baring his white teeth with half-understanding smiles between naps, and the old Arab cook. One who had shared this and many another day with me was already dreaming in her white tent out in the moonlight. We had been in our saddles some thirty miles since morning, and in those parts that is like fifty over a Christian highway — yes, more than fifty. For the thin bridle-path we had followed seemed, notwithstanding its venerable age, to sport with us like a boy in the game of "fox and hounds." More than once it suddenly vanished

in a newly plowed patch on some plain. Then it reappeared and ran, zigzag or winding, through a brook's bed, up or down a ravine, along a shelving trail around rocky hilltops, and at last tangled itself among numberless other paths on a steep slope beyond, with nothing that I could see to show whether we should go this way or that.

But Maloof, good dragoman that he was, always singled out the rover for us with the ease of instinct. When I asked how he knew our way among so many, he only laughed quietly. He was ever sparing of words when we spoke in his praise. "It is of your kindness that you say so," or some such phrase, was all he ever said. Nevertheless, I saw the shine of a tear once when he made this reply, after bringing us to safe shelter out of a storm; and that told more than many words.

Poor fellow, he had need of cheering speech now and then, no doubt; for he had neither wife nor child — so he let me understand once when I ventured to ask — neither wife nor child to stay his manhood with joy in his skill, and he had been traveling these lonely paths for years. Yet he knew the tender meanings of such relationships, as you shall see presently — knew them somehow as many men whose lives are securely bound therein do not.

Such a path often puzzled our hardy little horses to find footing. More than once it sent the long-eared donkey rambling off with his pack of luggage, patient and alone, until the muleteer missed him and set up a babel of guttural cries, or the little fellow stopped in mute disgust. But for the most part our poor beasts had scant help from us as they footed the rocky way. For the Syrian sun makes an Arab doze and a white man dream. But I was kept awake watching Maloof — this dragoman of ours who could make ruffians cower like spaniels, yet was so knowing in affairs of the heart! In the dream-light of that shimmering day I saw glimpses of the man which set me wondering about him.

Once — it was by the pool just beyond the olive orchards around Lubiyeh — we came up in time to catch four herdsmen in the act of pouncing on a man of Nazareth, whose donkey betrayed his master by refusing to budge. Maloof stepped in with a voice that quelled the uproar, drew lines on the ground with his riding stick, poured out Arabic comment on the same, then a wave of his arm sent the old donkey rider on his way, while the belligerents slunk back and let him go. Even the donkey seemed to recognize Maloof as his superior. But what those marks on the ground had to do with it all, I still wonder; for our dragoman only laughed when we asked him.

Some days later Maloof showed mastery of even higher order. A band of robbers? No, not exactly an affair of that class, though I have seen men lose priceless possessions in similar situations. The gleam of a long afternoon was softening toward twilight. Our path suddenly broke away from the hills and trailed over a flowered plain with no other purpose apparent than to give us a look at faces around a rock-mouthed well, where Syrian girls, striding lithely from their village with earthen jars on their erect heads, were drawing water. And what faces they were! I hope it is no disloyalty to say that not a few western debutantes would exchange their own tame features for some we there saw and count them proud acquisitions, once they were well cleaned. But, to tell the whole truth without flinching, there were certain faces around that sky-covered old well which were clean as well as beautiful, and conscious thereof, as any man could see at a glance. I inwardly thanked the wayward path for this favor, so finely molded were some of those sun-browned countenances, so lustrous and warm were their full-rounded, dark, and for the most part modest eyes. But the manly bearing of Maloof, his genial kindness tempered with a gentleman's reserve amid these ragged graces, charmed me more than their peasant beauty.

Once and again the bridle-path led over the very

door-stones in narrow lanes winding between a village's mud-built hovels. Then the children and an old woman or two would swarm to babble "bakshish," the ceaseless call in the East for a bit of coin; but the men did not join them. No, while Maloof pushed on, sitting his big native saddle like a field-marshal, they only answered our greeting with a courtesy surprising amid such squalor. "Neharak sa'eed," said we, taught by Maloof's example, which is a salutation of the land — "thy day be happy," much like our "good day." And they, tattered peasants of Palestine, answered in fuller phrase, "Neharak sa'eed umbarak" — "thy day be happy and blessed." A man seated on the ground after the manner of the East would spring to his feet as he said this; and I would try in vain to show with my own hand and body the grace of his response as his hand lightly touched breast, lips, forehead. It was as if he kissed his hand to you while it passed from heart to head — and he a poor peasant of the fields and sheep-walks, whose sinewy legs showed bare at the parting of his long, coarse cloak!

I have lingered on this scene because, as Maloof told us, this courtesy was sign and token of an ancient hospitality in the Holy Land which is close to the heart of the tale here told. But closer still is what I saw of Maloof himself, as we rode out of a village's hubbub. A group of urchins were playing on the dunghill which usually rises outside a village of Palestine, grown to a high and dusty mound by the dumpings of centuries. They ran out beside our horses, their little bare breasts showing brown and plump. Among them was a mite of a girl, whose baby feet softly picked their way over the stones, while her tiny hand was held out winningly. Maloof smiled down at the child and said in a low voice, "Look at those eyes, sir!" This occurred more than once, indeed. I noticed that it was always a girl-child that drew such words from him. Yet, pondering on our dragoman's make-up as I was, it must be confessed that I failed then even to guess that

there was any significance in this beyond Maloof's share in impulses common to most men.

Through such glimpses of lowly life quite forgotten by the big, modern world, we had come to Nablus and a captivating knowledge of our dragoman. He had permitted my horse to trudge on behind, most of the day. For the muleteer had a habit of his class which consists in creeping up now and then to whack your horse astern, accompanying this well-meant service with a gruntlike utterance, a certain horrifying "unnhh," raking his inward parts; all of which startles the rider far more than the horse. Then he fell to singing in weird, guttural quavers! And the dirge was sometimes a mile long!

With the music of Galilee in one's ears, the sweet mellow music of its lake and hills, who would not wish to listen to its still melodies without such periodic assaults, as he rides away through the silences of Samaria! The muleteer understood nothing of this, and innocently enough renewed his hair-raising attacks in spite of all we could say. But Maloof understood! Therefore he yielded to my request and let me ride far behind, only keeping a watchful eye over his shoulder.

Dear Maloof! It was a trial to you to have it so, no doubt; for the way was long to Nablus, and dangerous Bedouins were in those hills. But you have at least this recompense, that whenever I recall the happiness of that long quiet in the saddle, your name sounds in my memory amid the musings which were so sweet through its sunny hours.

II. AROUND A CAMP-FIRE

THE day itself was now a memory. In the tent's shelter, Maloof and the cook — for the muleteer was silent enough now — were chatting in bubbling Arabic across the long iron brazier wherein dying coals glowed dimly amid gray ashes. The cook was squatted on a low, four-legged, backless chair, much used in that country, his apron of well-worn cotton making an ample repository for spoons, cups, and the like, while he scraped together enough live coals now and then to make his small copper pot boil one more round of Turkish coffee. Maloof sat in a camp-chair, leaning toward the fragrant warmth with elbows on his knees, and the dark red fez which he never removed pushed back from a shining forehead.

I had watched them sip the black liquid from small cups without handles, watched them blow it leisurely and sip it steaming hot while they talked on, watched their big eyes, dark as their coffee in the candle-light, until my own eyes were half shut and the scene became all but a dream. At length Maloof glanced toward the spot where I was stretched, reclining on a pile of blankets which he had devised. Seeing that I was still awake, he said in a quiet tone:

"Galilee is a dear land, sir, is it not?" His smile showed how well he had understood why I wished to ride alone through the day. Maloof was a remarkable dragoman in many respects, but most of all in this, that he seemed, after years of laborious journeying through those sacred solitudes, to keep as fresh a sense of their charm, as tender joy therein, as one has on viewing them for the first time. I found myself growing eager to account for this. It is unusual in dragomans thereabout, notwithstanding their glib explanations, and is, indeed, quite beyond reasonable expectation in the ordinary working of human nature. I began to suspect that some romance

of his own heart, interwined perhaps with the supreme drama of history there laid, was renewing for him year after year the sanctities forever lingering amid those hushed hills and valleys. It was this, let me own, which roused me to talk of the day's musings. Perhaps by sharing them with our dragoman the thoughts of his own heart would be revealed.

But, alas, the richest treasures of feeling often lose their luster when they are carried into the dry air of speech. They are like shells and pebbles gathered by the sea, shining and rich with colors when you lift them dripping with the tide waters, dull and common enough when borne away to be shown to other eyes. Try as I did, I found myself failing to convey the real delights of the day's meditations in off-hand words. Maloof sat listening appreciatively, but that was all.

"A dear land, indeed, is Galilee!" said he, watching a fading glow in the brazier.

Then there came to mind a cherished belief of mine that the supreme worth of form and what is called atmosphere in language is in this, that thereby thoughts born of feeling can be conveyed to others in their native state. It is the sacred office of literary art to carry the sea and the moisture of tides with the pebble and the shell that they may not lose their life. The simpler the literary setting the better, if only it keeps and carries the natural hues of some genuine emotion.

So thinking, I was emboldened to choose a small product of the day and make trial of it on Maloof.

"Would you like to hear something that has been running through my mind to-day," I asked, "some verses on the lake up there?"

"Oh, was that it!" He twitched his broad shoulders in his oriental way expressive of good-natured compliance. "It would be pleasant indeed."

Quickly he spoke a few words in Arabic. The cook turned toward me with a silent gaze. The muleteer sat open-mouthed. Maloof squared himself about, crossed his legs, leaning back with hands clasped over

his knee, and turned his head to listen. It was a hard test for my verses ; but I faced it for the sake of doing all I could to kindle Maloof's memories into flame. And in truth, the famous lake had so laid its spell upon me, had seemed so like a thing of life there among Galilee's hills because of its beauty and memories, that I rather enjoyed saying over once more lines which had been repeated many times to the accompaniment of my saddle's rhythmic creaking. The reader may possibly wish to hear them as they sounded in the cook's tent.

TO LAKE GALILEE

I hear you, bright waters, your murmur I hear!
I know why you ripple and leap at my feet —
I, too, know the story you feign would repeat;
But tell it again to my listening ear.

'Tis evening once more on your quiet, green hills.
Were they tinted like this in that even of yore?
Did you press then as now on your pebble-white shore
To see in the sunset the folk with their ills?

And did you see Him? See the touch of His hand?
Hear the moans as they changed into cries of quick joy?
You thrill, and to speak all your powers employ —
That wavelet enfolded my feet on the sand.

At morn, unto fishers not far from your strand,
In remembrance of Him I sounded the cry,
"Have ye caught any fish?" And I heard them reply;
I beckoned, and straightway they rowed for the land.

I gathered some sticks and built me a fire;
There rose from the beach its wreath of white smoke;
Then I thought of the fish, and the bread that He broke,
Till my heart was aflame with a holy desire.

"Naught to eat! Naught to eat!" Like the fishers depressed,
I turned! there were passing two men of the land;
And one bore a string of small fish in his hand,
The other round barley-bread cakes at his breast!

"How oft He was known in the breaking of bread!"
I mused, while the fire burned bright on the sand;
"How oft when their spirits could ne'er understand
His kindness disclosed what in vain He had said!"

I know that you heard Him say, "Lovest thou me?"
To one who stood here in that morning of yore;
But a sinful man heard it to-day on your shore!
Did you hear what he answered Him, beautiful Sea?

The sun no more watches. Gennesaret's lea,
The hills, e'en the winds, in the dark are asleep.
No spot is so dear my avowal to keep;
Thou knowest I love Him who loved Galilee!

The cook returned his eyes to the dragoman. Soon, without a word, the old Mohammedan threw his head back and emptied the coffee-cup held untouched while he listened. Maloof, still leaning back with his hands over his knee, looked at me in silence. Presently a smile began to play about his eyes and mouth.

"Water-music!" said he. After a moment he added, "I wish you would write of the hills, also — of Nazareth and the hills."

Ah, think as you may of the verses I have ventured to repeat for you, friend! They found the heart of Maloof, and for that they are dear to me — for that and the memories of Galilee they sound.

"There is a sweet story waiting to be told out of Nazareth," he went on. "It begins, I mean to say, in that town; but it runs along this very path through the hills, runs on past Nablus and Jerusalem, even to Bethlehem in the south."

I waited, expectant of some glimpse into his own heart.

"I think of it whenever I ride out of Nazareth on this journey to Judea. I was a boy myself in Nazareth, sir, and — ah, it is a lovely story!"

What was it that he left unsaid? That broken sentence, I fancied, might have touched the mysterious cause of this man's ever fresh joy in those paths. It was an eager moment for me. That his own boy-

hood had been in Nazareth and was recalled as he thought of the Nazarene's youth there — this, at least, was now disclosed. Surely there was something unusual which made the story of the Blessed Mother's journey from Nazareth, before that divine boyhood began, hold such a spell over him in his late prime. For I learned long since that the holiest truths of religion lose their glow in the rub of life for most men unless some alloy of common human experience has been fused with their pure gold — unless some joy or sorrow has been grafted on the old tree to bear fresh bloom. I could not doubt, therefore, that some personal element had been blended in his thought of the sacred story of old, keeping it ever fresh and bright for him, and deepening through the years that charm which a Christian man finds therein when his heart is in its Maytime. For such Maloof was, notwithstanding his red fez and Arabic tongue, though I have forgotten until now to say so.

"How shall the story begin, Maloof?"

"I have often thought on that, sir. Why not in this manner:

"The hills that hide Nazareth in its high valley like unto a nest in the side of Jebel es Sikh had closed the view of their home for two travelers journeying southward over the plain!"

"Eiwa," said the cook, listening and gazing at the dragoman. Your Arab dearly loves a tale, and that is his pleasant word for "yes." Maloof continued:

"They looked back many times. They watched the three ravines which run up through those hills to their small town, until the deep hollows became like shadows on the line of highlands which rise toward Jebel es Sikh. But their town they saw no more, save certain houses highest up on that tall hill itself which towers above it northward."

"Go on, Maloof!" said I, rising from the pile of blankets and leaning towards him.

With the hush of voice and repose of face apt to mark the telling of a cherished tale in any land, but

most of all among orientals, as if the very words were stored in memory, the man's long pent but now welling thoughts flowed on:

"In that hidden valley held high by the hills were tender memories for them. The loves of home were there! But above all endearments common to those who are set in families was this, that these two, having learned to love each other, had there passed through a mystery together. Even in the happiness of their betrothal they had faced a surprise, a strangely awakened expectancy which began soon to be a reality, whispered at first by trembling maiden lips, perhaps to the mother's ear, and somehow made known to the lover's; a mystery, indeed — understood not by the carpenter and grievous to his upright heart for a time, and understood by no man through the years since then, though men have spun many webs out of this secret.

"By reason of this experience the young wife, soon to become a mother, rested in her good man's kindness, as they now journeyed together, with joy beyond the wont of women newly wed. For he had believed in her and made her his wife even while her heart was singing its strange song, 'From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.'

"So with quiet gladness they traveled on, but not forgetting to gaze back many times to the hilltops beyond the plain which looked down on their dear Nazareth."

Maloof paused, and sat in meditation. Soon he added slowly:

"It is a day's ride, for such as they, across that beautiful plain, past the bare rocks of Little Hermon, and the cactus groves and olive orchards of Shunem, and the old well before you come to Jezreel. But at last they entered the hills on the southern side of the plain; and the heights round their highland home passed from view in the light of sunset. The path became harder for her now. But the ways of a good man's love were the same then as unto this day, and — "

He hesitated, with his features working as if moved by emotion mingled with perplexity. Then he looked into my eyes appealingly and said, "You see how the story would run, sir."

Do you see, friend of mine reading this narrative somewhere in the world? Believe, then, that he who listened in the still tent that night was puzzled for the right word. Maloof seemed to me to have started a tale having its springs, not in the plain of common knowledge through which its rivulet must needs run, but instead high in the secret places of his own heart, as I had hoped he would. In such a case there is no telling whither the stream will wind, in sight of what eternal heights or through what valley's passing shadows and sunshine, ere it reaches sea tides.

"Go on, Maloof, go on!" I said.

"Ah, but I wish that you, sir, might take up the story now. I, myself, have never found words to follow it — on through these hills — though I have often thought upon it. They would journey along these same hard paths, you know, hard even for strong men — and she, young, and great with child! They looked on the same landscape, bare now, as you see, of adorning trees and much else that they must have seen, yet still the same hallowed land. They would meet with ways of life the likeness of which we have ourselves watched in a hundred forms. You must not forget that, sir, in telling the story; for changed as the people now are in race and religion and the waste of centuries, their customs and traits are strangely like what have ever been here. The magic of the unchanging East, I mean to say, holds its spell over this land. And because of that our travelers must have found, according to their need, the ancient ways of hospitality even as you would find them now, sir, should need arise; for the tokens thereof we have seen this day."

"Eiwa, eiwa," said the cook heartily.

"But best of all, as I said, the ways of a good man's love were the same then as now. Do you not see

what a light, what a radiancy, that throws on the way the story would run?"

His face shone with tenderness at these words. What could be the cause of this exquisite sensitiveness of his to the story of Mary and Joseph journeying from Nazareth? True, it is loved by myriads; yet the world over, so far as I had observed until now, it is loved for the sequel heralded by angels and discovered by shepherds at Bethlehem, rather than the prior human setting but briefly told in which our dragoman evidently found a great charm.

While I pondered what to say a disturbance was heard among the horses tethered in the moonlight. The muleteer sprang up and ran out. Presently Maloof followed him. We heard their Arabic speech gurgling out in the still night. The cook and I sat waiting for their return. Then it was that fortune favored me.

"The dragoman loves that story, cook, doesn't he? I should like to hear more of it, if we are not keeping you awake too long."

"Eiwa," came the slow answer. After glancing at the tent opening, he leaned toward me over the brazier. "He loss — hees — hees —" The old man's arms came to his breast and his body swayed as when one nestles a babe. "Eiwa! non far hon! So — de — de — la femme — feenish — ah, feenish!"

Bits of French loose many a tethered tongue in Arab lands, and "finish" is a great reliance when English is essayed.

"He lost his child — not far from here? And its mother died? When? How long ago? How many years?"

The cook dropped a cup he still held into his apron, and began holding up his fingers — five, then the other five, one hand at a time, turning watchful eyes on the entrance meanwhile. Twenty fingers were raised and counted; the old hands hung over his knees as if innocently idle when the red fez of the dragoman ducked out of the dark into the tent's dim light.

How was I to take advantage of this alluring glimpse into Maloof's life? The old man there on the brazier stool, quietly scraping together one more glow of coals, was now known to be an accomplice in my wish; but for some reason his manner while we were alone, together with the confiding look stealthily turned my way once and again after Maloof's return, admonished me to follow with caution the clew he had given.

There was a moment or two of voluble Arabic chatter between the three men, marked by much picturesque spreading of arms and uplifting of hands in a way that men of the East have, though it pertained to nothing more dramatic than the affair of the horses, I judged. Then the dragoman seated himself as before and turned to me with a smile which said as plainly as words could have done, "Enough of that little disturbance, sir; now to our story."

"Tell me about this hospitality of which you spoke," I began.

It was pleasant to see the relief in the cook's face as he turned to listen.

"Our travelers," I added, "would have need of that, no doubt, journeying through such country as we have just left behind."

"Ah!" he answered, "I like to think how it did not fail them! You may be sure that it did not, in these villages."

"Eiwa, eiwa!" The cook's voice had a tone of pleasure which we will not attribute wholly to Christian interest. But he was a good old soul, if he was a Moslem!

Then Maloof fell into rapid speech, telling how the people of that land had always held themselves under sacred bonds to provide for the traveler's need. He had himself enjoyed proof of this time and again. Indeed, they feared some calamity on themselves should they fail in this.

"They hasten to fetch water for the stranger," said he, "and they bathe his hands and feet; they set food before him; they bring wine; they pre-

pare coffee; they sit around him sipping the same and talking as friends; they press him to tarry as their guest."

Then, laughing and coloring in proof of a gentleman's thoughts at the memory, he told how once two daughters of the chief man in the village, seeing that he was very weary, took him to their father's house and gently obliged him to yield and let them bathe his feet in warm water with their own womanly hands!

"And this they did," he said, suppressing his merriment, "because there was no room for me in the inn, as you would call it."

So it was that he told me the first I had ever heard — though abundant confirmation was given me afterward — about a quaint and altogether beautiful institution in Syrian villages, including those of Palestine. "Medafeh" it is called by the villagers of to-day, and great is their pride therein, for the Medafeh is a guest-house belonging to the village and set apart for the use of travelers. Each village is likely to have one, and some have more than one. Where tourists have not spoiled the ancient beauty of it all, its hospitality is still found untarnished by expectation of recompense.

"They lead you to the Medafeh," said Maloof, "with kind words of welcome. One man, perhaps, shows a portion of its wall, telling that his departed father laid the stones, which are still solid, as you can see; a more aged man may point to some bit of workmanship which he himself performed in his youth. They presently begin to claim the privilege of providing this or that for your comfort — one will come with food for you in the morning; another will at once bring a blanket, for he observes that the night wind is cooler than usual; a third has already thought of the very lamb which shall be prepared for your dinner on the morrow. At last they take their leave, assuring you perhaps that a watch will be set while you sleep, or at least bidding you rest without fear.

"So it has been in this land from of old, for they

believe that a blessing is brought on their own heads by such kindness to strangers. Do you not remember how the like of this is found many times in the Holy Bible? Yes, it is a very ancient custom, this hospitality of villagers. Our travelers from Nazareth most certainly found its comforts open to them in their time, as, believe me, they are open even in the poverty of to-day. I myself — it was years ago, when my need was great, sir — I myself found it as I tell you, not far from this spot."

Silence followed. The cook glanced at me anxiously. Soon Maloof seemed to gather in wandering thoughts.

"But better than this hospitality of villagers — better to her, was her good man's kindness; no doubt of that. I often think how he would cheer her when she became road-weary. Indeed, sir, I have a strange fondness for pondering on how he might have talked to her at such times. Here at Nablus — you know this is old Shechem, where they surely came — this fancy always fills my thoughts. The surroundings of Nablus are great with memories, sir, here where these two mountains face each other!

"'Mary,' I think of him saying, 'Mary, hear the streams of goodly Shechem flowing! It was even in this place of springs that our father Abram pitched his tent by the oak of Moreh and God said to him, "Unto thy seed will I give this land."'

"And then, as they journeyed on, I fancy him speaking again. 'On the morrow, wife, we shall see the well which our father Jacob dug; it is in the parcel of ground which he gave to his son whose name I bear. Keep good heart, dear woman, amid such scenes!'

"It is just around this mountain, sir, that well — we shall see it in the morning — and think how Mary's Son sat by this very well as he journeyed. But I shall think, also, of how the mother passed it before his birth! I shall hear her good man saying, 'There it is, Mary, close by the road — our father's well!

Shall I bring you a cool drink? The well is deep, and its waters will be sweet with memories for you.' "

A hush had come in the tent as Maloof talked on, which gave a fitting moment for such rapt thoughts. The cook and the muleteer were nodding, and so heavy with sleep were they that Maloof and I were as good as alone. The brazier's coals had faded to gray ashes.

"But it is long past time for us to turn in, sir!" he said.

"And we will go on with the story in the morning at Jacob's well," I answered. I took his hand as we said good-night.

Oh, the stars, when I came out from that tent and stood alone! They flashed their cheer through all the Syrian sky. A gleaming host thronged the central heights of silence, and stretched away into distances where even such brightness as theirs became a dim glimmer. A mist hung low over the still land — land of what sorrows, what joys, what memories! But above the misty veil of earth, above the huge shapes of Ebal and Gerizim, above the night's vast gloom, shone those stars!

Before sleep came in my tent I heard the guards which Maloof had set whistle once and again — whistle the signal of the Arab night-watch.

III. OUR DRAGOMAN'S SECRET

IN the morning I was out for a "shem-el-howa" while yet the sun was sending ground-level streams of light into the valley between the two mountains. You ask what a "shem-el-howa" might be? That is the musical word of the Arabs for "a smell of the air."

Sweet as the breath of morning is the world over, I fear that no language at my command will carry across seas the fragrance of that sunrise time in the hills of Samaria. But mingled with it an odor was

presently scented which all healthy souls will be able to share with me. It was the savor of breakfast in the out-of-doors.

Peering in where the tent-flap was thrown up, I saw my old friend, the cook, turning long slices of bacon, already browned, for their final crisping. A dish of white eggs, a pan crowded with cherub-faced rolls, a pot eager to ease itself of steaming hot coffee, were close about him.

"All ready, cook!" said I, cheerily. "Where is the dragoman?"

He looked up from the glowing brazier. His hands being engaged with matters which could not be dropped, even for an instant, at that juncture, and his available English failing him in the emergency, he called me in by a jerk or two of his head.

"He — he — non far — non far; he come, monsieur! sure!"

Little by little I gathered out of his broken speech and sign-language that Maloof had gone, as he always did when they came to Nablus, to the grave of his wife. It was somewhere on the slope of Gerizim, not far from our camp. While we breakfasted the old cook did his best in response to our questions to tell the story which I had discovered the evening before. When put together bit by bit it is, to the best of my understanding, as I now give it.

Some twenty years before, or a little more perhaps, Maloof with his young wife journeyed from Nazareth, where he had grown to manhood and married, over the route we were now following. They were going up to Jerusalem, there to make their home. Riding on the nimble-footed little animal, the donkey, which one still sees everywhere in that land carrying all manner of loads and ridden by all sorts of people, the rough paths had proved too hard for her. They stopped for a time, therefore, on reaching Nablus, finding lodgment in the Medafeh, or guest-house.

There, somewhat before the time of their expectation, a child was born. The townsfolk, true to

ancient custom, were unfailing in every kindness. But in those days the disorders which used to prevail in the hill country of Palestine still subjected travelers to constant peril of hardship, and occasionally brought them to grief. Robbery was high-handed, sometimes occurring on the open road, where beating the victim or even murder was a part of the day's work, sometimes perpetrated by deep-laid schemes of stealth.

It was difficult, for lack of English speech on the cook's part and consequent resort to much Arabic pantomime, to make out precisely what happened in Maloof's case. But the main facts, I think, were made sufficiently clear. Let the reader judge for himself.

With only chance words thrown out to help us follow him, or a mongrel phrase now and then, at length whispered or uttered with bated breath, and meant to serve like flickering tapers in a dark passage, the cook acted the narrative with true oriental vividness. I had seen this done before, once when a shepherd told me, without a word of English, how he could not let me have his rod or club because of the wild beasts he had to face in the hills around Lake Galilee; and I watched the cook now with some confidence while the pantomime deepened and darkened.

At last the old man crouched, and crept, and leered; and he gave an occasional low whistle withal. It was easy to see that robbers came upon Maloof, and at night. Yet what that low whistle signified was for the moment quite beyond my powers of interpretation. But soon, when he had stopped as if listening, he gave the whistle again, a double whistle, quiet but distinct, then listened as before, then turned his eyes with a back-gesture and whispered, "Feenish, ah, feenish!" then grinned as a villain might.

Suddenly I recalled how I had heard the guards whistle round our tent that very night, and all was clear. The robbers had killed the village watch set to keep the Medafeh, where Maloof and the mother

and the babe were sleeping. They whistled that the sleepers, should they wake, might think that all was well.

Nodding to show that I understood, we watched while the cook, abandoning speech, made a lunge — delivered a blow — uttered a cry, a woman's cry, and followed it with a man's prolonged groaning. Then he made as though he grabbed for something, and wrapped it about, and fled; and with that he sounded a woman's scream. Then in the attitude of flight he brought his arms to his breast, swaying his body like one who hushes a babe, as he did the night before by his brazier.

While he stood looking at me, I recalled the bare scar on Maloof's head. I had noticed it once when the fez which he never removed was blown off as we rode in a storm.

Having come through the black depths of tragedy, where his knowledge of my tongue had utterly failed him — indeed, does not language fail us all in such matters, though a man speak of them in the tongue wherein he was born? — the old Arab laboriously pieced out the tale with scraps of speech which I could understand by dint of questioning.

In substance, I made out that Maloof lingered in unconsciousness and then in long helplessness; that the robbers made known their demand of ransom for the baby girl kept in hiding; that the villagers failed in nothing through weeks of gentle care, save that their poverty and peasant impotence left the child unrestored; and finally that the mother, pining for her little girl and grieving over her husband, at length closed her eyes, and was laid by kind hands on the slopes of Gerizim.

There were a number of questions with which I was still eager to ply the cook, when the dragoman suddenly appeared and greeted us in his cheery, quiet way, making some pleasant comment on the morning's beauty. You would never have guessed that he had come from such a trysting-place as that grave

on old Gerizim's side. No, some men are large enough to keep their sorrows so deeply sequestered in their own broad breasts that the shadow thereof does not reach face or voice to darken the light that shines for others. And such a man was Maloof, O friend, now thinking of him with me! The world is kept bright and sweet by the triumph of such heroes. Even so earth is in deep reality the ante-room of heaven; for the joy is the joy of them that overcome.

Soon came the busy and rather merry time of breaking camp, and lading the doleful donkey and the muleteer's beast with our luggage, and hoisting "Madame" to her seat of state, and lastly bestriding our own saddles — Maloof and I — with the zest of men keen for another's day riding on fragrant hills.

I well knew what made "Madame" — that is Maloof's own word — ride so silent beside me. I have often seen her become suddenly quiet when hills were in view; but now it was not the hills — it was that vanished baby girl. Yet what could a man do across twenty years! I dismounted presently and handed up a nosegay of white flowers plucked from the roadside.

"They are star-of-Bethlehems!" said she.

We both remembered that later, though neither of us saw any significance in the name then.

"Ride by Maloof a while," she added with a voice of sympathy.

I noticed that our dragoman's eyes scanned the town's housetops, swept the green and gray sides of Gerizim, and looked far eastward, where lay the Jordan's gorge and the fastnesses still held by roving Bedouins. But he spoke only of the cloudless sun mounting from that wild expanse, of the beauty of the vale and the slope of great Gerizim in its light.

"We shall have another fine day for riding, sir," said our dragoman.

Who was I to speak of aught else — to pluck a

single leaf from the conqueror's shining laurel by mentioning a grief of long ago! Sympathy is a precious remedy for easing pain if it be applied when the suffering is fresh; but it is apt to start new pangs when a bungler ventures to make untimely use of its efficacy. Therefore I did as I was told and simply rode beside Maloof. And bright was our way as we talked of the morning's splendor.

Ah, the beauty of this dear old earth when each new day kisses its worn features and gilds them with the shining of its smile! The dews of its night-time, which seem so like tears, sparkle then and make its rugged face all the more entrancing by reason of the joy that has come unto it.

Quite apart from the charm shed on all about us by the triumph I was watching, which this man never so much as dreamed that any eye was aware of, though doubtless there is joy in all heaven when they who dwell there look down on such victories, the surroundings of Nablus are picturesque to a high degree. On either side Ebal and Gerizim confront each other in such nearness that from remote times they who pass the spot have felt the dramatic effect of these vast sundered presences. No wonder that the astute leader of Israel's pioneers, keen for using everything at hand to impress Jehovah's will on a stiff-necked and rather prankish people, seized upon these two mountains and the valley between as a means of grace. Did he not command that when they had passed over Jordan they should assemble there, half on Gerizim's side and half on Ebal's? Then from the side of Gerizim was to sound the blessing of the law, and over against Ebal was to be heard its answering curse. And so it was, while the altar of the priests sent up its smoke down in the valley between. No wonder that they listened, those full-veined men of Israel and their women and their little ones! Perhaps they also trembled, until in the hush that followed the ring of voices they heard a still, small voice, heard it and thought of God; but of that we are not told. You can

shout there now for yourself and find what the old sounding-board of the two mountains will do with even a lone voice like yours.

Streams run from numberless springs thereabout, making pleasant music like the blessing, or rushing in deep-toned torrents underground like the curse that was and is along the paths of men. Olive orchards are there, gnarled old trees with twisted coral-like trunks, but lifting misty-green expanses of foliage for shade and fruit for man's delight. Vineyards spread their woody vines, filled with the benefactions of the grape, over terraces circling far and high on rocky slopes. Flowers tint the landscape everywhere; rocks mottle the whole shining prospect with their gray hardness. The dwellings and the tombs of men show out amid the fragrant greenness, and alike catch the glint of the sun's shining. Over all this picture of the blessing and the curse in man's life hangs the canopy of such a sky as no land can surpass for serene tenderness, a visible symbol of the love which waits to be enjoyed and obeyed. Once that love is obeyed — now or ever — obeyed and enjoyed, then comes to pass the saying that is written, "And there shall be no curse any more."

Through such a vale we rode until at its opening eastward our way turned to the south around the foot of Gerizim; then the town was left in its sequestered nook and no more seen. Before us spread the level fields which Jacob bought in the shrewd thrift of long ago. The tomb of the good Joseph was thereabout — perhaps where they showed us a small building, bearing the honor of marking the spot, toward the further side of the plain, wherein a score of boys sitting on a stone floor were droning the Koran to their stripling schoolmaster.

Beyond that, nestled against Mount Ebal in the morning's shimmer, was what is left of the town whence came the woman of Samaria across this strip of ancestral land to draw water at yonder well. For there it was, a little distance ahead, Jacob's well!

One draws near that curb with hushed voice. It is one of the few spots in Palestine where the traveler can say with certainty, "I stand in the actual footprints of the Christ."

We passed down the broken steps and entered the dilapidated, fragmentary structure which covers the well's mouth. A peasant, not uttering a word, began lowering a tray bearing lighted candles. Slowly the descending circlet of flames disclosed the masonry, walls true as when their builder's hand shaped them. At length we saw the glimmer of water; there was a flash, a quiver of welcome as the tray rested on its breast. The lowering cord was at least sixty feet from hand to lights.

But even the sight of that water did not make me forget to watch the face of Maloof as he bent over the well in silence. Partly with desire to know, but moved also by sympathy for him, I asked, "What is the depth of water?"

The dragoman began questioning the peasant in Arabic, speaking softly.

"Twelve meters when last measured," Maloof announced. He said no more.

After a time we read aloud the story of the Nazarene's talk with the woman beside that well. When we came to the words, "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up unto eternal life," I glanced at Maloof. A smile broke over his countenance and lingered, there in the murky shadows of the ruins over Jacob's well.

So in good heart we took to the road that leads to Jerusalem. At length Ebal and Gerizim, rising in the haze between the billowy land crested in ridges of high rocks, and the unruffled sky, began to wane. Then we passed over a hilltop, and the region of Nablus, with its charm of ancient sanctities and this hitherto unheard romance of a man's heart which I alone, perhaps, will always associate with it and deem worthy

of a place among its holy memories — Nablus between its two mountains passed from view.

Who that reads this narrative would have pressed our dragoman to go on with the story of Mary and Joseph in the environs of Nablus? Yet, as we turned that hilltop and a long slope opened into a pleasant plain, I saw no reason why it might not be mentioned and was pondering how to begin.

Suddenly, far ahead I saw a black line on the plain's expanse. It looked like a herd of cattle at first, and seemed to be moving from behind a hillock. Yes, it was coming toward us.

"What have we there, Maloof?"

The dragoman was already watching the singular appearance with sharp gaze. Presently he laughed outright.

"What is it?"

"Pilgrims, sir — pilgrims on foot, from Jersualem to Nazareth and the lake. It is our good fortune to have a look at such a sight."

Then he told how from many countries the peasantry journey to the Holy Land and go in small bands or in throngs from one sacred locality to another. The procession was still emerging into view around the hillock. A few mounted men were discerned riding along the line. Maloof explained that consulates had learned to send guards with these inexperienced people on their longer expeditions. He told how these poor folk subsist on meager purchases of food or innocent forage, and sleep in whatever shelter can be found for so many, being aided by establishments called hospices set up by those who would encourage their pious excursions. He told, too, how they often suffer, and related a recent incident in which thirty odd expired in a storm on that very road, most of these wayfarers being old people fulfilling a hope cherished through a lifetime.

As the procession came nearer we heard them singing, the poor souls! singing while they trudged on. It was a pathetic melody, rising in the spacious

stillness, a tune resonant with the joy of souls time-worn.

"They are Russian!" exclaimed our dragoman.

Soon they flocked along the road beside us — old men, with hot looking caps and beards and quilted coats and high-topped boots; grandmotherly creatures, with woolen skirts tucked up about bovine bodies, and hoods or bonnets or head-cloths thrown back from glowing faces. "Drastuite," cried Maloof, cheerily. Immediately the weary faces brightened, and "Drastuite! Drastuite!" began to sound along the line, while many a toil-hardened hand or long walking stick was waved in friendly response.

I followed Maloof's example and called out, "Drastuite! Drastuite!"

"What does it mean, Maloof?" I asked after a time, still repeating the word which they understood so well, while their pilgrim song rose with fresh spirit. In the merry tumult I could not hear the answer. But I went on calling "Drastuite" with all my heart. For it was easy to see that Maloof knew the word of salutation to make them glad. And many were the faces muffled in reddish beards, and the countenances with pale blue eyes and the cheeks of bygone motherhood, which grinned at us kindly out of the thousand and more that filed by.

Maloof was kept busy answering questions or telling what his own mind suggested about these pilgrims until their singing died away and they became as at first, a black line in the distance, a quaint phenomenon of the world's manifold piety which chanced to cross our path and soon vanished.

"These north roads," he said as we talked on, "have been trodden by processions of many different kinds. Long before these pilgrims, the crusaders passed this way. Here the legions of the Romans marched against Jerusalem long before the crusaders. The country folk of Hebrew times went up to the Passover along these roads year by year through cen-

turies. Yonder hill, no doubt, many times heard them singing:

'As the mountains are round about Jerusalem,
So the Lord is round about his people,'

and those other pilgrim songs which are in the Psalter."

With such talk to kindle our thoughts, noon came before we were aware of it, and down in the depths of a fold in the hills ahead we saw Khan Lubban.

In this ancient landmark we doubtless found all much the same as travelers through that land have found in the khans for numberless years — a high-walled enclosure, with a court for animals open to the sky; covered areas along the inside of one or more of the walls wide-open toward the court, affording shelter, but not the slightest retirement for travelers; a well of good water at hand; a menial keeper or two, with no thought of providing anything for the traveler, and the utmost freedom for all comers.

We spread the food we carried in the shade of a wall outside the khan, throwing a blanket on the ground. After the meal, Maloof and I sought a plot of grass and stretched ourselves thereon. It was the opportunity for which I had waited since morning.

"I have been thinking about our travelers from Nazareth, Maloof."

"Ah, yes."

"Would they stop, also, in a khan like this?"

"No doubt — in mid-day, I mean to say, and in the open country, as we do now."

Then he was silent, and so was I. The hour was heavy with heat and lent itself to silence and dream. At length he spoke again.

"I often think here how they must have rested in this very khan, for this valley road is long and villages are far between. But not at night. No, the ways of a good man's love would have it otherwise. He would not bring his young wife into such a place for

the night, you may be sure. Would you, sir?" After a pause he added, "Would I?"

He looked into my eyes calmly. Something like the glow of kindled memories was in his gaze; but soon I had the satisfaction of seeing that he could keep his secret of sorrow secure.

"In the khan," a look of revulsion accompanied these words, "would be caravan men with their sweating camels, groaning as they handled their loads! Muleteers and herdsmen would jostle and banter; shepherds would turn in with goats! In the midst of such a clutter of road-life traders would hawk their wares and soldiers swagger about, loud-mouthed and leering at women! Ah, sir, even at mid-day and far from centers of travel, as here in Khan Lubban, it would be hard for the young wife. But at night and in a town — how dreadful!"

"But when they came to Bethlehem" —

"Ah, let me speak of that!" he broke in. "I pray you not to think as I find many do, not knowing this land as I know it. They read the words, 'There was no room in the inn,' thinking only of the khan, where each is left to care for himself; so they think of Saint Joseph as left to find lodgment for the Blessed Mother wherever he could, no one heeding them, no one taking pity on the fair young face, weary and — like that of one whose hour has come! And they talk of him finding a place for her in a stable — 'with the beasts of the stall,' I have heard them sing! Oh, it grieves me that men should blunder like that! It robs the people of this land of one beautiful virtue which has always been theirs, many as their faults were and are!"

"But are we not told," I interposed, "that they laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn?"

"Hear me, sir — I will make all clear. Think of the Medafeh, or whatever guest-chamber villages had then — think of this as the inn which Saint Joseph sought, as any good man would. What then? Why,

sir, this would bring them into the hospitality of the little town. Have I not told you how I, myself, was taken to a home by strangers when there was no room for me in the Medafeh? You must forget this custom of hospitality which is the pride of these people even now, as it was in Bible times, to think of our Lord's mother being left as Christendom thinks of her. What a pity that the beauty of a people's long, long pride in hospitality should be forgotten at the hour of its crowning opportunity! Our world seems unkind enough, without losing sight of any proof of its real goodness and love!

"You stumble — pardon, sir! — you misunderstand, I mean to say, the words which carry the sweetest message about Bethlehem's kindness. 'Laid him in a manger?' True! true! But how beautiful that becomes when understood aright. You think, with your ways of life, of a place for cattle only. But have you not seen that the common people and their animals live together in this land? You will find it so, in Bethlehem — everywhere — even now; you read of the same in the Bible itself, which is so true to life here, all sorts of domestic animals with their feeding places in the dwellings of the lowly. Ah, I like to think how, when the little town was crowded by reason of an enrolment, and there was no room in the inn, some kind villager said, 'Come to my house,' and so a place was made for Mary's Babe in a household manger! There is an unknown saint for you, sir, the woman of Bethlehem who made a place in her poor home for our Saviour! Do not forget that, when you write our story. 'No room in the inn!' — yes, as often now, no room in public places, no room where the crowd is, but room in some lowly home, room in some heart that does its best to receive him kindly; this is the way of his coming into our world from that first Christmas night until now. This is the meaning of his manger-cradle!"

The afternoon sun poured a sultry heat along the spiral road as we climbed the steeps which wall in

the valley of Khan Lubban. Having taken carriages for the ride to Jerusalem, we were sheltered somewhat from its glare, and the passage through the long "Valley of the Fountains of Robbers," with its unending terraces of olive trees sweeping and twining their lengths along the slopes, was to us like a royal approach to the city of the great King.

A breeze sprang up to enhance the hours. But as the day began to wear away a wind-storm broke. The dust became blinding. The curtains, lowered to shield us, bellied like sails. Clouds rushed through the air, black and furious. I have never seen a more impressive and altogether awesome spectacle than that which spread before us when in the murky gloom the toiling horses dragged our vehicles to the top of Mount Scopus, and Jerusalem, twinkling with lights, burst on our sight across the upper Kedron valley. City of God, city of what destinies! How raved the storm-clouds over thee that night!

Near the north gate welcoming hands received us into a house whose hospitality to us and to many through long years of simple joy in overcoming evil with good would itself make a beautiful story. In the light of that door Maloof bade us farewell. "Remember to see the people in their homes when you reach Bethlehem!" he called, as he vanished in the windy dark. Our dragoman had kept his secret to the last!

IV. A WOMAN OF BETHLEHEM

"O DU froeliche, O du selige" —

What was happening? Children were suddenly running beside me; fair and ruddy children with countenances such as we had not seen in all Palestine; children with sparkle and deep lights in their big black eyes! And they were singing — yes, singing to me! Alas, Maloof was no longer near to smile calmly and tell me what it all meant!

My donkey promptly stopped and refused to pro-

ceed. I did not greatly blame him, so sweet was the sound; yet I was eager enough to go on, for there, just up a little hill, was the gate of Bethlehem! The droll creature gravely swung his ears as if to take in the whole medley of voices, and I, having no wide range of choice, did likewise in a man's way, listening in hope of discovering what they were singing about. I often smile yet, thinking how a little donkey gave me such happy guidance into Bethlehem. My notice fell on a beautiful child in the group. Her shining eyes were lifted pleadingly, her bare feet pattered in the dust, her hand was held out, shaped like a tiny cup, and her lips were cooing the words of the song. What! Could they be German words? Yes, the child was softly singing with her mates:

"O du froeliche, O du selige,
Gnadenbringende Weihnachtszeit!"

As I watched her mouth and listened to the other voices, I made out words which in our language would run something like

"O thou joyful, O thou blissful,
Christmastide salvation-bringing!
The world forlorn, Christ was born!
Thy joy, O Christendom, be singing!"

At last here were children who had learned to utter the East's endless call for "bakshish" in a manner that did away with annoyance. This was a fitting introduction to Bethlehem, indeed, this sweet singing about Christmas! No locality in Palestine, excepting Lake Galilee only, leaves the musing pilgrim as free from disquiet and revulsion of spirit as Bethlehem does. The poetry of the gospel's beginning is laid in a region which to this day keeps a romantic atmosphere as of old.

The road from Jerusalem affords not a glimpse of the little town itself until it reaches the hilltop halfway, where rises the bell-towered monastery of Mar Elyas. It is six miles long, all told, and is a common

enough highway in every aspect — this road between the village of the Manger and the city of the Cross. As you traverse the dusty way up toward the monastery, there is little in sight to kindle the spirit, unless it be the long blue haze eastward which fills the void above the low-lying Dead Sea and lends a mystic beauty to the far heights of Moab beyond.

But at Mar Elyas all this is changed. You look across a valley checkered with terraces and stone walls, bright with olive orchards, vineyards, grain fields, and deepening grandly eastward; and beyond, you suddenly see Bethlehem lying silent in the sky-line on its hill-crest. This view is like a vision of things dreamed of, for it is the first sight of the dearest town in the lore of childhood. Few hearts, I fancy, are so world-worn that they do not quicken their beating when that view opens.

And what then? Descending into the valley you come to the poor structure called the Tomb of Rachel, she that was loved at sight in the old days and loved to the last, until she died at the birth of her only son and was buried "where there was but a little way to come to Ephrath, the same is Bethlehem." Just beyond, where the road begins to ascend into the town, those singing children surround you. As you go on up the road to the old gate and look into the great valley eastward where the fields of Boaz and of the shepherds lie among watch-towers and olive trees, perhaps you are thinking of the beautiful Rachel and Benjamin, her son; perhaps of the lovely Ruth and David the ruddy; perhaps of Mary and her child; perhaps of the women of Bethlehem you are now meeting, the fair, full-eyed mothers of such children as those who sang to you at the foot of the hill. But in any case, you are thinking of the sweetest reality in the world, mother and child. For this is the glory of Bethlehem.

It need hardly be said that the talk of Maloof, deepened by the story out of his own life, so strangely blended with it, had set a human interest coursing

through my thought of all I saw. I found that this vivified even the Nativity's matchless charm. Yet at first, such an alien was I, a mere tourist among the peasants, I saw only what tourists see — the crooked little streets with their quaint life, the hubbub of the market-place, the ancient castlelike church, the underground room hung with tapestry and lined with marble and glimmering with thirty pendent lamps and having a silver star at the spot where Christ was born, these and the like — much, indeed, and well worth journeying far to see. But the little town's ancient life did not lay its spell upon me at first. It was not until the third and fourth day in Bethlehem that I saw what I now relate.

There was a boy who took to recognizing me with a friendly smile when we chanced to pass each other in my roaming. He seemed to be a manly little fellow, though not more than twelve years of age. His face shone with good-nature and he could speak in my tongue — somewhat haltingly it is true, but he made up for that by talking with all speed in his own. To him I at length confided my desire to see the people of Bethlehem in their homes, as Maloof had admonished. His black eyes kindled at that. Yes, he would take me into houses he himself knew.

I soon observed that he was searching out certain newer and better dwellings to his thinking, though they were old and poor enough for the most part. This pleased me not a little as to the spirit of the lad, and I took care to show interest in what we saw. Nevertheless, my desire was toward the old-time houses and ways of life.

In rambling about I had observed that the hill whereon the town is upraised opens toward the beautiful east valley somewhat like a crescent. The road from Jerusalem enters at the northern tip of this curve; over on the southern end stands the Church of the Nativity, as it has for nearly sixteen centuries in one form or another. On the southern side, too, is the Milk Grotto where, as ancient tradition has

it, the Mother and Child were concealed from the terror of Herod's men ere they fled to Egypt; there, a short way down the slope, is the house of Joseph, so they say these many years; and below that is the cluster of houses where the shepherds dwelt, they who were keeping watch over their flocks in the valley beneath the hill on that first Christmas Eve. Moreover, the ancient market-square which is near the center of the crescent is yet well over toward this southern side like a landmark of the olden town. All in all, therefore, the southern end of the ridge seemed to be the place for my quest. Indeed, a friend who knows Bethlehem well had told me that the oldest houses and most primitive life were to be found there.

Presently I said to the boy, "Now let us go over where the church is. Do you know any houses over there?"

"Come!" A quick pleasure was in his voice; "Come! Anteeca Bet-lee-em!"

Soon we entered the small street leading to the Milk Grotto along the wall of a monastery and garden attached to the venerable church. It was easy to see that the boy was now more at home; he spoke familiarly to everybody — everybody except the Greek priest standing in the monastery's side entry, looking rather imposing in his long black robe and tall, flat-topped, black cap, while a line of Russian pilgrims such as we saw when Maloof was with us emerged into the street. To him the boy did not speak.

"He took a board of wood against me one day!" said the little fellow confidentially, when we were safely out of hearing. We were entering a covered passage which opens nearly opposite this monastery door and runs down the southwesterly slope.

When you have followed this tortuous passage a hundred feet or thereabout, you come to an open stone stair against the wall on your left. Opposite this, across the passage, is a door. Through that door I now ask the reader to follow us. Perchance in

days to come some who read what is here told may find that door in Bethlehem, and remember to look in thereat. Know, then, that I can not do other than speak truly.

The doorway leads at once into a living-room. A small fireplace, built like ours, save that it has no flue, as I afterwards found, is seen against the back wall straight before the door. An old woman sat on the floor by the fireplace, slowly turning a flat-stone grinding-mill, dipping wheat from a tray into the cavity at the center of the upper stone with the thin hand of age. She stared at me in mute surprise. But the boy with a few Arabic words quickly changed all that to a grin of welcome. Soon she beckoned me in.

I manifested cheerful interest in her mill, and she went on turning it, nodding up at me and grunting not unpleasantly.

We were thus engaged when a young woman with a babe in her arms came running in from the passage outside. She was evidently the mistress of the dwelling, and after a quick-spoken conversation with the boy she lost no time in making me welcome with many a reassuring smile.

It is the sober truth to say that she was beautiful. And what a gift of God the human smile is! Few were the words which either of us could speak which the other would understand; but she and I talked kindly to each other, and the smile and the boy made all well.

The young mother was dressed in the garb which distinguishes Bethlehem married women. The long, loose gown worn throughout Palestine is bright and many-colored in Bethlehem. Around the waist is a girdle of folded cloth adding to the medley of colors — dark blue, dark red, green, white, yellow, but somehow surprisingly well blended. This dress has an opening at the breast, which is drawn together by a cord and adorned round about with bits of silk stitch work. On the head is set a round, high cap, flat-

topped and rimless, whereon the inviolate coins of the marriage dower are sewed; they would not be parted with any more than the wearer's womanly honor or life itself. Over this precious head-piece is placed a cloth covering, white or yellow or pink, which like a veil frames the face about and falls gracefully over shoulders and back. This striking head-dress is the special mark of the Bethlehemite costume. Even an ordinary face is rendered picturesque by such a setting.

But this young woman's face was by no means ordinary. On the contrary, it was of a type which any one, woman as well as man, would pronounce beautiful. For her comeliness of features was enriched by that happy blend of colors found in the human countenance which all eyes enjoy, and withal it was lighted by the brightness of a sweet spirit.

Her face was oval in its lines and ruddy with the tints of a clear complexion sun-browned. Her lips were full and ripe, revealing teeth of that even, arching whiteness which one sees among the peasantry of Palestine with constant surprise. Her eyes were full-orbed and deeply dark, but quick with gentle flashings. Her forehead was maidenly and arched with soft, black hair. To crown all, the joy in her babe, which she held close to her face, shone like morning sunlight. Morning sunlight, I say, for she was surely not far from twenty years of age.

There was from the first a haunting sense that I had seen this face before. But after watching her for a time I concluded that this was only a characteristic of her type of womanly grace.

Radiant with kindness — I found myself wondering what the boy may have said to her of me! — she watched and smiled approval as I began looking around her poor home. I took care to keep up a show of appreciation, laughing to manifest my interest in each object observed, the stone hand-mill, the well-built fireplace, the water jars beside it, and the like, turning to her in the door-light and nodding to

express what I could not put into words that her ears would understand.

It was evident that she was pleased and proud in a young wife's way to have this stranger take such interest in her home. Soon, as if to show the best of all, she came toward me and laid her hand on the baby's head, then hugged it to her young bosom! My heart was moved with thankfulness to the good God of us all at that. Then Bethlehem's Mother and Child came to mind, and so vivid and tender was my thought of them that for a moment it was quite too much for merry speech. But little that young mother guessed why the stranger was suddenly silent!

"Where do they sleep?" I asked the boy presently.

"Here." He waved his hand toward a dark end of the room extending from the fireplace.

"Where?"

"Here," he repeated, stepping into the gloom.

I followed a few paces, striking a match or two.

Quickly the little mother handed the child to granny, still seated by the hand-mill, and brought me a small lamp, a wick in a brass oil-can. She shook it, laughing the while, to be sure that it had oil. Just as I got the wick alight, a small black cow raised herself in the dark by the end wall! Then a hen ran past my feet!

"No," said I to my guide, "I mean where do the family sleep."

"Here — all around here — on blankets of wool," he replied. In the lamp's dim light I now saw a narrow, slightly raised space running along the rear wall from the fireplace to the room's end. I was also able now to examine the walls, which I could not do satisfactorily before. Believe me, it was a cave in the hillside rock, simply closed in by an outer wall of masonry!

Having made this discovery, I went feeling along the face of the rock with a thumping at the heart which, I hope, needs no explanation. When I came

to the corner where the enclosing rock turned to make the wall against which the quiet little animal lay, the lamp's flicker disclosed a small recess hollowed out in the rock itself. I bent low over it! I passed my hand along its worn surface!

"Very old!" said the boy.

I held the light close to the spot. Had I found a feeding place — a manger? There was the cow. I scented her kinelike breath, so near was she. And it was in a cave-house which was the home of a peasant's family!

While I mused, the young mother suddenly started up a short flight of steps open to the room. She stood mid-way with her babe in arms, called, and then beckoned.

"What does she want?" I asked. The boy answered, "Up there she would show the — that in which the child is laid."

I could hardly suppress the shout that was in me! Do you see the reason? Why did she think of that at sight of my interest in the old hollow in the wall? It was as pretty a bit of evidence as ever a man hit upon in the dark. She knew how children often sleep in a manger among the peasants of her land, and was reminded to show the stranger the cradle, yes, the rocking cradle which her little one enjoyed!

We followed her, the boy and I; and in an upper apartment, arched over by the top of the cave, she set out a cradle made of boards, laid her child therein and rocked it with the glee of youthful motherhood.

I passed down the stair, satisfied that I had seen such a house as that wherein the young wife from Nazareth, soon to be mother of the world's Saviour, was given shelter on that first Christmas night. The grotto over where the church stands may have been the spot; but this old cave-house close beside it, on the same end of the ridge, with its cow in the family room and its manger in the cave walls and its child-loving peasant woman, this far more than the other was like the place where they "laid him

in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

How strange that it had remained there so long, unspoiled by man's tampering veneration, a stone's throw from the other which men have made so unnatural with their marble and tapestry and lamps and quarreling priests! Glad was I to think, not of a lonely cave, not of a rude place for cattle only, but of a home, however poor, as the place that sheltered Mary and her little Jesus!

Then I remembered the words of Maloof: "No room in the inn, no room in public places, no room where the crowd is, but room in some lowly home, room in some heart that does its best to receive him kindly; this is the way of his coming into our world from that first Christmas night until now."

We were standing at the foot of the stair when another boy ran in, spoke to my guide, and scampered off.

"My father has come, he has been bringing the sheep! I must go, please!"

"May I go with you?"

"Come!" And off he started. It was pleasant to discover that I had been led to the cave-house by a shepherd's son.

What I saw in the home of the shepherd near by, the father's simple welcome, the mother's haste to prepare him food and their wish that I would share it, the way of three small children, who pressed my hand to their lips and foreheads when I was departing, all this I will not pause to relate. For my thoughts run on to another matter. Above all else, as I passed into the throng that had gathered in the market-place and the square before the great church, I was thinking of the young mother in the cave-house. Does any one need to be told why?

V. BETHLEHEM AND THE PRINCE

YES, the market-place and all its approaches were crowded. The prince was coming to Bethlehem! Near the point where the winding little street leading from the Jerusalem road emerges into the market-place was stretched a welcoming banner. Early that morning at the other end of the highway I had seen Jerusalem's loftier bunting in the market by the Jaffa Gate. On that, Prince Eitel Friedrich, son of the German Emperor, was welcomed — think of it! — in French, by "La Ville de Jérusalem!" Not so in Bethlehem, the kind little town! On its banner were the words, "Willkommen Dem Prinz!"

The villagers, men and boys, and peasants from all the hillsides round about, were sitting or standing in a throng that filled the market-place and that spacious area which still shows traces of the atrium of Constantine, but is now an open square between the market and the church. Above them, along the parapets of flat-roofed buildings adjoining, were long lines of women and girls, their bright garments and unveiled faces making such an array of color as only a vast flower-border could have equaled. But flowers could not have matched them in the music of rippling laughter and merry chatter which came down through the sunny air. Only birds could rival that.

Turkish soldiers patrolled a central passage through this square, and a line of stacked guns extended from the banner in the market-place to the small door which is the sanctuary's main entrance. Flags were waving along the cornices and from the towers of the sacred edifice itself — waving with becoming quietness, so gentle was the morning's breeze. There was a white flag here and there among the crimsoned emblems of worldly power. Whatever its significance may have been, it impressed me with its fitting beauty there on the spot where the Prince of Peace was born.

But all this peasant array and expectancy could not hold my eyes from the glorious valley in full view eastward. There are no buildings along that side of the area before the church. Over a low wall and a narrow old burying-ground you look down on enclosures filled with olive trees, fig trees, grape-vines, and the greenery of gardens. The descending terraces circle away on either side like great horseshoes piled there, with the center of their long curve turned toward the hilltop town and their open ends encompassing the deep valley whose expanse escapes their embrace and lies afar in the sunshine. At the heart of this valley reposes the Field of the Shepherds. You can see it — there where stone walls surround a number of olive trees. No, the jubilation in Bethlehem could not hold me. I was thinking of another Prince!

There is a road winding around the base of the church's somber pile and descending the eastward slope of the ridge whereon it stands. This road leads to the village part way down the slope where the Christmas shepherds dwelt, it is said. Who knows? But I passed down, thinking that those shepherds may have hurried up this very road in the starlight when that other Prince came to Bethlehem. It is the main egress from the valley. Peasants passed me going to see the prince now coming, Der Prinz Eitel Friedrich — trudged up the steep way, chattering as they went.

At length I was alone in the valley. Then I came in solitude to the Field of the Shepherds.

The stillness was enchanting. Far up the terraced slope northward the monastery of Mar Elyas was seen on its hilltop. From beyond I heard the low boom of the great bells that are in Jerusalem. The prince was coming! Then, listening in the valley's silence I seemed almost to hear the voices of long ago — their song when that other Prince came to Bethlehem.

On the hilltop westward the view of Bethlehem which surpasses all others for loveliness drew my eyes. I could see the square old houses clustered

around the valley's top. I could see the people thronging before the church and crowding adjacent roofs and windows — yes, could see the flags against the skyline on the Church of the Nativity. Now and then a jubilant outcry carried down into the valley like the far sound of many waters. But round about me was no sound save the low song of birds when the heat of the day has come,

"Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn."

For there, near and alluring, were fields that bear the name of Boaz.

Southward rose the Frank Mountain, a grim height resembling a truncated cone; for this burial-place of that Herod who struck terror to all hearts in poor Bethlehem that he might make sure of killing the King who was born there, rears itself like a beheaded monster near the town, even to this day. Eastward spread the wilds that border the Dead Sea.

Such was the encircling view that held me in spell. Not far away a man passed with a noiseless camel. A shepherd-boy beside a bunch of goats was in sight on a hillock, gazing up toward the hushed tumult of the town. But these were as voiceless as the wild-flowers close about me. Presently, among the flowers I noticed the white, long-petaled star-of-Bethlehem. Its familiar face instantly brought to mind the morning when I plucked that flower for one who bade me ride beside Maloof out of Nablus. And then — then — my thoughts hovered about the young mother in the cave-house!

While pondering the perplexity which the sight of her had raised, I heard a wild burst of shouting up in Bethlehem, a merry blare of trumpets, a long, silvery jangle of bells. The prince had come to Bethlehem!

This ended in a long quiet, during which I saw the people facing the church. I did not doubt that the

prince of Germany was kneeling in the ancient sanctuary before the Prince of Heaven. And so he was, as I heard later, to the honor of Eitel Friedrich. Then the shouting started once more and swelled even as the deep-sea roar is wont to rise and wane and rise again.

At length I left the sweet quiet of the valley and climbed in the mid-day heat back to the town. I would see it once more before leaving it for years, perhaps forever. But not alone because the Prince of Life came there long ago was I returning. Or, rather, it was because he came, after all. Do we not get our clearest visions of his coming and pay him our deepest homage when we go anywhere with impulses of human kindness mingled with our love for him? At any rate, I clambered up the steep paths back to Bethlehem, thinking also of the cave-house mother.

The German prince was gone. The little town was already settling itself into its ancient ways. I found my shepherd-boy guide standing with his father near the church door. It was easy to renew talk with these friends, for so they were.

"He, the prince, said prayers to our Saviour, like us, on his knees!" said the boy with glad eyes. Soon I led them by questions not too direct to other matters, and little by little, the boy acting as an intermediary, I gathered what the father knew about his young neighbor's wife. Not much, he doubtless thought; yet I would tell you, reader, what he said.

She came to Bethlehem about two years before, as the young shepherd's bride; he had heard that she was from an orphanage somewhere — it was in Jerusalem that the Bethlehem youth found her. Yes, he remembered that when she came to Bethlehem as a bride it was understood among the neighbors that she had grown up in an orphanage. He had himself heard her say that she did not know her father's name, that her friends at the orphanage had answered her questions by describing how they found her one

morning asleep in a sheltered place by their house, and had taught her to call herself "Abdullah, God's child," when she began to talk.

Thus, a little at a time, the boy interpreted what his father said in response to my queries.

When I bade these friends good-by, the father gave me the beautiful salaam of the men of Palestine already described in this narrative.

Mounting my donkey, I rode away from the town, loved since childhood and now endeared by manhood memories to be cherished to old age.

Intertwined with musings of the Blessed Mother who there laid her Child of Grace in a manger because there was no room in the inn, were pulsing thoughts about the mother and child of the cave-house home with its fireplace and its manger — yes, and its cradle. They seemed to belong together, each interpreting the other.

It startled me, so deeply pondering was I, when at the foot of the hill the children ran beside me as before, singing their song,

"O thou joyful, O thou blissful,
Christmastide salvation-bringing!
The world forlorn, Christ was born!
Thy joy, O Christendom, be singing!"

The donkey did not stop this time. For he was homeward bound, and "the ass knoweth his master's crib." But I could not refrain from dropping a few coins in the dust!

All the way up the long ascent to Mar Elyas this question was turned over and over, "Should I send word to Maloof about the little mother of the Bethlehem cave-house?" Her face surely was his face, I could not doubt that; this was why it had impressed me from the first as a face I had seen before. But more subtle and significant still was the likeness to him in her smile, her poise of head to express a state of mind, the intonations and accents of her speech, and the atmosphere of her spirit. These things,

God be thanked, are indelible signs of parentage in a child.

And she was undoubtedly about twenty years of age — the shepherd had the same impression — and grew to maidenhood in an orphanage, left there by stealth — and none knew her father's name! Would it not be so, if robbers took pity on a stolen babe?

But should I tell Maloof, write him and take the risks of being mistaken, of kindling false hopes which would blaze and burn in his noble breast? Even if I could eliminate the possibility of error as to the fact, what then? It is no slight matter to assume responsibility for bridging a chasm of twenty years, a chasm which different life conditions may make both deep and wide. And how little I knew about these people after all! O, it was not so easy as it seems at first sight to find the course which would be surely right, though my heart leaped with its eagerness to tell Maloof I had found his lost child!

Brooding on it all, we came, the donkey and I, to Mar Elyas on the top of the ridge half-way to Jerusalem. The donkey submitted grudgingly to being headed around for a moment. There lay Bethlehem silent in the skyline on its hill-crest. For a brief moment I gazed; then we turned toward Jerusalem and Bethlehem passed from view — for long, perhaps forever.

The story which Maloof started that night by the cook's fire in camp at Nablus is finished. Will there be another chapter?

As I write that question my own daughters, barely woman-grown, are sleeping under their father's roof in far America; and he in a still room above them, remembering what they mean in his life, is thinking of the dragoman from Nazareth and the beautiful mother in the Bethlehem cave-house. Thoughts of the coming Christmastide are also at work in his heart. He is reflecting how at Christmas there is no blessing quite so precious, after the memory of the Christ-child, as this, that then the olden prophet's

words come true in our busy world, "He shall turn the heart of the fathers to their children, and the heart of the children to their fathers." And on his desk beside the pen that writes this, "Merry Christmas to all," is a sheet of letter paper whereon are already written the words, "Dear Maloof."

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